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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the educational needs of rural students and suggests ways that college programs can be adapted to the learning characteristics of rural students. Rural students are likely to be global learners, have a strong preference for cooperation, view learning as a social experience, have an aversion to individual recognition, experience difficulties with arbitrarily-set time frames, prefer to have information transmitted orally and in a social setting, exhibit a tendency toward subjective conclusions, and have a sense of powerlessness concerning events and the environment. Two South Carolina state universities modified graduate and undergraduate courses to address the learning characteristics of rural students by including a highly detailed syllabus describing course objectives; utilizing small group work; emphasizing group recognition for team work and activities; promoting an informal class environment; encouraging students to work at their own pace; focusing on oral discussions; relating learning concepts to life experiences; and giving students choices about how to approach, organize, and present assignments. This teaching approach is considered both cost and energy efficient and promotes meaningful learning for rural as well as urban students. (LP)

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ADDRESSING THE NEGLECTED NEEDS OF RURAL LEARNERS

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INTRODUCTION

Currently great emphasis is being placed on multicultural education in teacher education programs and in public school classrooms. But it is interesting to note that the majority of authors writings on the subject have paid little or no attention to the differences between urban and rural education. The typical textbook seems to assume education is an urban event. It is a rare author that suggests there is a difference and offers adaptations for rural needs. The reform movements of the 1980s have demonstrated this same bias. Since they are urban oriented, they have failed to address the unique aspects of rural education. It has not been treated as an educational entity with specific needs, but rather as a troublesome area that required remedial work (Bloodsworth 1993).

While the reform movement has benefited urban schools, it has only added to the problems of rural schools (Cole, 1988). As a consequence, rural education has become little more than a second thought. Its uniqueness has not been considered, and for the most part, teachers' and students' skills have not been developed to address rural learners. Rural learners are expected to perform on the same level as urban learners, yet their means of doing this is not being addressed (Bloodsworth and Fitzgerald, 1993).

The emphasis on higher academic standards by the urban generated reform movement has placed rural schools in a losing position as the battle becomes one of simply surviving, rather than one of achieving academic excellence (Cole). As new courses and studies are added to the curriculum as a means of meeting these higher standards, the needs and learning characteristics of rural students are overlooked, or more likely, are unknown by the the curriculum developers (Bloodsworth and Fitzgerald, 1994a). Thus rural schools are caught up in a catch twenty-two situation. In an attempt to raise standards, students are given more of what has caused the original problem.

CHARACTERISTICS OF RURAL LEARNERS

If our educational systems are to be restructured in an effective manner, urgent and serious consideration must be given to the needs of rural education (Fitzgerald and Calliham, 1992). Historically the unique learning characteristics of these students have not been given proper consideration (Fitzgerald and Bloodsworth, 1993). Far too often rural college students are unaware of their own learning styles and do not realize that rural learning characteristics differ from urban ones. Many professors are also unaware of these differences and their relationship to teaching strategies, both urban and rural. Early returns from a survey of rural teachers (currently being conducted by the authors) seem to indicate that these teachers are well aware of differences between rural and urban students, but they were never taught such

distinctions in their professional education courses. Truly, a major element seems to be missing from most teacher education programs.

If effective teaching and learning is to take place, the learning characteristics of rural students must be identified and strategies developed which match these identified characteristics. And this must become an intergal part of our teacher education programs nationwide. It must also be understood that rural learners are still rural learners, even when they are transferred to urban schools.

Potterfield and Pace (1992) have identified learning characteristics of rural students in the southeastern United States. While these characteristics were limited to the southeast, the authors of this paper, through numerous surveys and collaborative efforts, have found them to be quite consistent nationwide, and to be national rather than regional. (Bloodsworth and Fitzgerald, 1994b).

The more notable characteristics are listed below.

Rural learners are:

1. Likely to be global learners
2. Likely to have a strong preference to cooperate with others
3. Likely to see learning as a social experience
4. Likely to have an aversion for individual recognition
5. Likely to have difficulty with arbitrarily set time frames
6. Likely to prefer to have information transmitted orally and in a social setting

7. Likely to exhibit a tendency toward subjective conclusions
8. Likely to have a sense of powerlessness concerning events and the environment

DESCRIPTION OF MODIFICATIONS FOR RURAL LEARNERS

Modifications have been made in the course work offered for students enrolled in undergraduate and graduate courses in two South Carolina state universities that draw heavily from rural areas. These changes are matched on a one-to-one correspondence with the learning characteristics of rural students as listed above. They are:

Global Learning. In each education course, a highly detailed syllabus that describes the broad objectives and their relationship to the content and activities is utilized. In addition, the introduction to each class session includes a description of the "larger picture" for that session. Continual emphasis is placed on the relationship of concepts being taught to the concepts being addressed in other program courses. A summary for each session is included to emphasize the relationship between components of the session's activities.

Preference For Cooperating With Others. To meet this need, small group work is utilized during regular class sessions. The use of teams is incorporated in assigned projects. Oral presentations, often as team projects, are routinely employed in the course work. Emphasis is also placed on the sharing of materials and professional sources.

Adversion For Individual Recognition. Team work and team activities are assessed with a common grade being given. Individual recognition, whether oral or written is done in private and emphasis is placed on group recognition.

Perception Of Learning As A Social Activity. The interaction between students and professor is done on an informal basis in order to develop a positive social atmosphere for the class. Humor is frequently used when drawing analogies from the course content. The goal is to maintain a warm, supportive classroom climate.

Difficulty With Arbitrarily Set Time Frames. Each course syllabus includes an overall description of the work required and the due dates. This allows for the students to plan their own schedules within the overall time frame. The major importance of this is the fact that students work at their own pace, but must complete their work by the due date. Also major quizzes may be rescheduled by the class to avoid conflict with other assignments.

Preference For Orally Transmitted Information. Discussion is included in all lessons. A multimedia approach is also used in all classes. Among other things, this includes the use of video tapes, cassette tapes, slide presentations, demonstrations, computers, realia, and guest speakers. Cooperative group research is shared orally with the whole class and is often a major focal point for class discussions.

Tendency Toward Subjective Conclusions. Students are urged to investigate, gather data, then make decisions based on their knowledge and experiences. A serious attempt is made to re-

late concepts to the students' life experiences. Data related to course information is collected from local news releases as a means of adding data based on real experiences from the students' environment.

Sense Of Powerlessness. The majority of course requirements are in the students' court, not the professors's. Students have many choices about how to approach, organize, and present assignments. Students may also negotiate quiz grades by submitting appropriate supporting data if they believe their answers have merit. The grade is adjusted if the data is supportive. Emphasis is placed on the learning role of everyone in the classroom, students and professors alike.

CONCLUSION

Since the major emphasis is placed on classroom climate, social cooperative skills, and teaching strategies, these modifications and adaptations can be accomplished in any undergraduate or graduate course. By including the needs of rural students in the design of course work and teaching strategies, colleges and professors are in a position to make major contributions to the teaching learning process. This approach can be adapted to any discipline or content. And as it is done, it will trigger other needed modifications and adaptations to meet specific needs that will arise. Cost is insignificant and any increase in planning time is negligible. Current textbooks and teaching materials can be modified by the professor as the content is

presented and discussed. These adaptations make the model especially attractive as time, money, and resources are considered in curriculum planning. While urban students learn equally well using the rural learning model, rural students do not learn equally well through urban approaches. The power of this positive approach lies in the fact that in addition to its cost and energy efficiency, the implementation makes teaching more effective and efficient with more probable and meaningful retention of learning for rural as well as urban students.

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